



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**HEDGING IN THE DISCUSSION SECTION OF RESEARCH  
ARTICLES WRITTEN BY NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE WRITERS OF  
ENGLISH**

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**HEDGING IN THE DISCUSSION SECTION OF RESEARCH ARTICLES  
WRITTEN BY NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE WRITERS OF ENGLISH**

**By**

**HELEN TAN**

**Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia  
in fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts**

**August 2002**



**To my Heavenly Father, in whose presence I find comfort and strength**

**and**

**To Mary, my Blessed Mother who never fails to intercede for me**



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

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**Chairman: Associate Professor Chan Swee Heng, Ph.D.**

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Hedging as a pragmatic-discourse phenomenon has gained much attention among academics and linguists researching the English language as well as other languages. The use of hedging is a significant communicative resource for academic writers to put forth their claims without the fear of being negated by the discourse community.

This study compared the use of hedges in the discussion section of Research Articles (RAs) of two groups of writers (native versus Malaysian) and of two different disciplines (humanities versus science). For this purpose, the hedging patterns in 40 RAs ( 10 each from the two groups of writers and the two different disciplines) were analysed contextually.

The findings from the study showed that both the native writers and Malaysian writers generally did use hedges in the discussion section of their RAs. However, by comparison, the native writers tended to hedge more than Malaysian writers. In addition, it was also found that formulaic hedging expressions were popular among Malaysian writers. In comparing between the disciplines, writers of the science discipline appeared to hedge slightly more than writers from the humanities disciplines.

In sum, hedging is an important rhetorical device that permeates academic writing and therefore, language instructors should sensitize their writing students to the effective use of hedging in academic writing.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera

**STRATEGI MENGELAK KELANSUNGAN DALAM BAHAGIAN  
PERBINCANGAN KERTAS KAJIAN YANG DI TULIS OLEH PENUTUR JATI  
DAN BUKAN PENUTUR JATI BAHASA INGGERIS**

**Oleh**

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Strategi mengelak kelangsungan sebagai satu fenomena wacana pragmatik telah mendapat perhatian hangat dalam kalangan ahli akademik and ahli linguistik yang mengkaji bahasa Inggeris dan juga bahasa lain. Kegunaan strategi mengelak kelangsungan ialah satu sumber komunikasi yang penting bagi para penulis akademik supaya mereka mengajukan dakwaan mereka tanpa ditolak oleh komuniti wacana.

Kajian ini membuat perbandingan kegunaan strategi mengelak kelangsungan dalam bahagian perbincangan kertas kajian antara dua kumpulan penulis (penulis penutur jati bahasa Inggeris dengan penulis Malaysia) dan juga antara dua jurusan yang berlainan (jurusan kemanusiaan dan jurusan sains). Untuk tujuan ini, analisis secara konteks dibuat keatas pola strategi mengelak kelangsungan dalam 40 kertas kajian (10 kertas

kajian daripada dua kumpulan penulis dan 10 lagi daripada dua jurusan yang berlainan iaitu jurusan kemanusiaan dan jurusan sains). Kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa secara umum penulis penutur jati bahasa Inggeris dan penulis Malaysia telah menggunakan strategi mengelak kelangsungan dalam bahagian perbincangan kertas kajian. Namun, secara perbandingan, kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa penulis penutur jati bahasa Inggeris telah menggunakan strategi mengelak kelangsungan yang lebih banyak daripada penulis Malaysia. Tambahan lagi, kegunaan strategi mengelak kelangsungan berformula sangat digemari oleh penulis Malaysia. Dalam perbandingan yang dibuat antara jurusan, telah didapati bahawa penulis jurusan sains telah menggunakan lebih banyak strategi mengelak kelangsungan daripada penulis jurusan kemanusiaan.

Sebagai kesimpulan, strategi mengelak kelangsungan ialah satu bentuk retorik penting yang berpengaruh dalam penulisan akademik. Oleh itu, pengajar bahasa terutamanya pengajar bahasa Inggeris perlu mendedahkan keberkesanan kegunaan strategi mengelak kelangsungan dalam penulisan akademik kepada pelajar mereka.

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I certify that an Examination Committee met on 21 August 2002 to conduct the final examination of Helen Tan on her Master of Arts thesis entitled “Hedging in The Discussion Section of Research Articles written by Native and Non Native Writers” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (higher Degree) Regulation 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.

  
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## **List of Abbreviations**

CP	:	Co-operative Principle
FTA	:	Face Threatening Act
MW	:	Malaysian Writer
MWs	:	Malaysian Writers
MW (H)	:	Malaysian Writers from the field of Humanities
MW (S)	:	Malaysian Writers from the field of Sciences
NW	:	Native Writer
NWs	:	Native Writers
NW (H)	:	Native Writers from the field of Humanities
NW (S)	:	Native Writers from the field of Science
NNW	:	Non-Native Writer
NNWs	:	Non-Native Writers
PP	:	Politeness Principle
RA	:	Research Article
RAs	:	Research Articles

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Background**

In the past, research on writing had mainly focused on learners' difficulties in writing as well as their attitudes towards writing. However, in the last decade or so, researchers of writing have begun to focus on more specific aspects of text construction. Among these has been the study of the use of hedges in academic writing. The term 'hedge' was first used by Lakoff (1972:194) to mean "words whose job is to make things more or less fuzzy". Since the 1980s, hedging devices have been viewed as pragmatic phenomena that are prevalent in academic writing, particularly so in Research Articles (RAs). In the academic world, the RA is a public documentation of findings by researchers. It is an important medium by which researchers report their claims to their discourse community while at the same time anticipating acceptance or rebuttal of the claim. Therefore, stating a claim was a face-threatening act that warranted mitigation. As a result, a researcher or scientist was said to employ appropriate hedging devices as a strategy to mitigate the claim. The employment of hedging devices in RAs evolved to become a part of the conventions of the academic genre.

It must be noted here that RAs belong to a sub-genre of academic writing. The concept of genre as Swales (1990) puts it, is integrally tied up with the role of texts in realising the communicative purposes of the discourse community.

Therefore, genre is to a large extent fashioned by these purposes and the constraints imposed by factors in the contexts in which the text is produced. The characteristic features in any genre then could be invariant or they might vary according to the rhetorical demands of particular situations in which they occur. To put it simply, Dudley-Evans (1986) clarifies that genre has characteristic features of style and form that are recognised, either overtly or covertly, by those who use the genre. Therefore, writing in a particular genre such as research writing would have to conform to its conventions.

However, Hyland's (1996) study on hedging in academic writing revealed that generally non-native writers (NNWs) lacked the ability to hedge their claims and, thus, NNWs were not able to conform to the convention of the RAs genre. This led Hyland (1996:278) to assert the point that NNWs 'invariably require training in the appropriate use of hedging'. The reason given was that NNWs often have difficulties in expressing their commitment and detachment of their propositions in their research writings.

This inability to hedge propositions would definitely impede the NNWs' involvement in the world of research as stated by Hyland (1996b) who saw the inability to hedge statements appropriately as an obstacle to the NNW in participating actively in the research world which has always been dominated by English. A related point was also made by Kaplan (1987) who claimed that there was a lack of subtle writing skills among NNWs and that a NNW did not have a list or inventory that would allow him to make choices nor did he have the

sociolinguistic ability to identify these choices. Furthermore, a NNW generally failed to recognise the constraints a choice imposed on a text.

Day (1988:2) in his guide to scientific writing asserted that ‘science is too important to be communicated in anything other than words of certain meaning and that scientific writing should be as clear and simple as possible.’ However, studies have shown that writings in scientific RAs, are among other features, heavily hedged. There is therefore an apparent discrepancy in the advice given in Writing Manuals and the actual practice of researchers – creating problems for NNWs who wish to master the conventions of the RA genre.

### **Statement of Problem**

The phenomenon of hedging in academic discourse had generated a lot of interest among researchers in the linguistic field. Several studies on the use of hedges have emerged such as those done by Skelton (1988); Myers (1989), Salager-Meyer (1994, 1997, 2000); and Hyland (1996a, 1996b, 1999, 2002). However, the corpora of these studies were taken mainly from the ‘hard’ sciences such as molecular genetics and molecular biology. A possible reason for this slant was that researchers of ‘hard’ sciences tended to carry out experimental research that would lead them to make rather definite claims. The use of hedges was therefore inevitable.

Although the study of hedges began with the ‘hard’ sciences, research into the ‘soft’ sciences such as the field of Economics, Education, Language and

Communication Studies has also been undertaken. One of the earliest studies on the 'soft' sciences was done by Bloor and Bloor (1993), who investigated how economists modified their propositions. A few years later, researchers such as Kreutz (1997), Namsaraev (1997) and Vassileva (2000) had enriched the existing literature on hedging by studying hedging in texts written in languages other than the English language. Kreutz (1997) did a comparative study on hedging in English and German academic texts, while Namsaraev (1997) explored hedging in Russian academic writing in sociological texts and Vassileva (2000), investigated hedging in English and Bulgarian academic texts. However, studies of hedging in RAs of Malaysian writers, particularly ones that compared RAs written by NWs with that of Malaysian writers in both the science and humanities disciplines, are relatively scarce.

In the Malaysian scenario, research on hedging is not something that is entirely new. However, the focus of the study was mainly on the oral discourse. An example of one such study was the work done by Zuraidah (2000). She dealt with hedging in the speeches of participants in a talk show. Although there have been efforts by Malaysians to study the hedging phenomenon in oral discourse in the Malaysian context, there is still a dearth of studies on hedging in written texts, particularly those that studied the hedging phenomenon in Malaysian academic texts.

## **Purpose of Study**

In view of the scarcity of related studies by Malaysians on hedges in academic writing, the purpose of this study was to investigate the categories, frequencies and forms of hedges in the RAs in the fields of science and humanities written by Malaysian writers (MWs) and native writers (NWs). The RAs chosen from the field of science were those from the Medical Journals and for the field of humanities, the RAs chosen were from journals in English Studies. In addition, this study also sought to compare the extent to which frequencies and forms of hedging differed between the following groups of writers:

- a. Malaysian writers versus native writers in the field of humanities
- b. Malaysian writers versus native writers in the field of science
- c. Malaysian writers in the field of humanities versus Malaysian writers in the field of science

Since the hedges were identified in the context of the move-structures in the discussion section of the RAs, the pattern of hedges found in the move-structures and the forms of hedges were examined. Finally, the occurrence of the dominant hedges in the move-structures was compared between the native and Malaysian writers.

## **Research Questions**

Based on the contention that there is limited research on hedging comparing Malaysian writers and native writers in the field of science and in the field of

humanities, it would be interesting to find out more about the hedging patterns in science and humanities RAs of Malaysian writers and how they compare with the hedging patterns of NWs. Therefore, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the frequencies, categories and forms of hedges used in the Research Articles (RAs) written in the field of humanities and in the field of science by:
  - a. Malaysian writers?
  - b. native writers?
2. To what extent are the frequencies and forms of hedges in the RAs different between the following groups of writers:
  - a. Malaysian writers versus native writers in the field of humanities?
  - b. Malaysian writers versus native writers in the field of science?
  - c. Malaysian writers in the field of humanities versus Malaysian writers in the field of science?
3. What is the pattern of hedges found in the move-structures in the RAs and what are the forms of hedges?
4. How do the occurrences of dominant hedges in the move-structures differ between the native and Malaysian writers?



## **Significance of Study**

This study is pertinent as it attempts to shed some light on the forms of hedges used by the NWs and MWs in two specific disciplines namely the field of humanities and the field of medicine. In addition, it is hoped that this study would find out whether the MWs, as non-native writers, suffer from an inability to hedge their propositions as claimed by Hyland (1996b). If this study did establish that MWs had difficulty in hedging their claims, then it would certainly heighten the need for specific input on hedging for prospective writers of RAs among non-native speakers.

Finally, the findings from this research might be of use to textbook writers. Hyland's (1994) study on twenty-two ESP and EAP textbooks showed that these textbooks which were essential tools to the learning of academic writing did not emphasize the use of hedging devices. Therefore, it is hoped that this study would be a catalyst for textbook writers to focus on this writing feature and provide interesting and challenging exercises on hedging in their textbooks for academic writings.

## **Limitations of Study**

Most RAs are written according to the Introduction-Method-Result-Discussion format. However, this research only looked at the discussion section. This move was prompted by the work of Hyland (1996) where he stated that the concentration of hedging devices was highest in the discussion section. This is not surprising because the discussion section in any RAs is a platform for writers to